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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [HR](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION - MESIC IN FIRST ROUND?

REF: A. ZAGREB 02002

[B](#). ZAGREB 01601

[C](#). ZAGREB 01571

[1](#)1. SUMMARY AND COMMENT: President Stjepan Mesic appears poised to win a second five-year mandate in the upcoming presidential election; the only question that remains is whether he will get the necessary 50 percent one vote in the first round on January 2 or face a second round against his nearest rival on January 16. While Mesic and Jadranka Kosor of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) are the only ones with a hope of making a second round, 11 other contenders signed on for the short, holiday-season campaign, more candidates than in any presidential election since Croatian independence.

[1](#)2. While none of the other 11 is likely to break even five percent at the polls, they have come out of the woodwork for a variety of reasons. The most colorful characters of the race (a soccer coach who led Croatia to third place in the 1998 World Cup, a former army general turned shady entrepreneur turned extremist politician, and a "local boy does good" millionaire back from Minnesota) seem bent on self-promotion. Others are using the election campaign to voice right-wing beliefs from which they feel the HDZ government has strayed. The rest are in the business of party building - increasing name recognition and mobilizing activists for local elections expected in April or May 2005.

[1](#)3. With results so predictable (Mesic is consistently polling around 50 percent, while Kosor is lucky to draw 20 percent with only 15 percent left undecided), the election's real value may in the end be to show PM Ivo Sanader just how small the extreme right of Croatian politics is, encouraging him to continue, and perhaps even step up, reforms on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

WISECRACKS AND WISDOM) MESIC AS THE CITIZEN PRESIDENT

[1](#)4. At age 71, Mesic remains the nation's most popular politician, a classic populist who often serves as the moral compass of the nation. Throughout his five years in office, he has cultivated his image as the genial and witty "citizen president," in sharp contrast to the oft bad-tempered style of his predecessor, Franjo Tudjman. Known in U.S. circles as a leading opponent to Article 98 and troops to Iraq, Mesic has actually played an extremely positive role in Croatian politics since the 1960s.

[1](#)5. Mesic was imprisoned for a year for his role in the "Croatian Spring" of 1971, a movement against Belgrade's domination of Yugoslavia. Mesic later served briefly as the last president of Yugoslavia and even more briefly as Croatia's first prime minister. He returned to parliament as speaker in early 90s, but then left in protest against the HDZ's policy promoting the division of Bosnia. Mesic became one of Tudjman's most outspoken critics, and as president he can claim at least some credit for leading Croatia out of the international isolation brought on by Tudjman's regime. He also spearheaded efforts to amend Croatia's constitution, greatly reducing the presidential powers of Tudjman's day and transforming the country into a parliamentary democracy. He has focused on his experience during the campaign, asking voters to let him continue to improve the nation.

CROATIA'S SOCIAL CHAMPION: KOSOR ON THE SOFT ISSUES

[1](#)6. Kosor, currently deputy prime minister and minister of family, veterans, affairs, and intergenerational solidarity, was selected as the HDZ candidate only weeks before the campaign began and faces a steep uphill battle against Mesic. Simply forcing a second round would be a huge success. The HDZ, however, has opened its checkbook and activated its political machine, making Kosor by far the most promoted candidate in the campaign.

[1](#)7. Kosor's radio programs for refugees and other victims during the war years in the mid-1990s first endeared her to the Croatian public. She then became a parliamentarian and later deputy chair of the HDZ. Kosor thrives on social issues and has focused her campaign on improving living

conditions for disadvantaged groups. She has stepped ahead of the HDZ on a few issues, perhaps to show herself as more than Sanader's puppet, taking an absolutist stance against sending troops to Iraq, calling the indictment against Gotovina flawed, and flatly opposing the controversial Druzba-Adria oil pipeline from Russia to the Croatia coast. However, her Mother Theresa image, as Mesic calls it, continues to define her. In classic Mesic style, he has lately taken to calling his opponent "Lady Suzanna," after she wept at campaign event ("suza" is Croatian for tear).

SHOUTS FROM THE FRINGES

18. The marginal voices in the campaign have tended toward the extreme, with several candidates claiming that ICTY fugitive Ante Gotovina should not surrender to The Hague, and others focusing on reasons why Croatia does not need the EU. Fortunately, all of the far right candidates combined will be unlikely to break 10 percent on January 2.

19. The GoC has opened 155 polling places in 50 countries for the Croatian diaspora and Croatians in BiH and SaM, who enjoy the rights of citizenship without ever stepping foot in Croatia. This will likely give a needed boost to Kosor, as the HDZ dominates in communities outside the country, and is probably her only hope in forcing a second round.

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